UNITED
NATIONS

A

General Assembly

Distr.
GENERAL

A/CONF.157/PC/63/Add.20
23 April 1993

ENGLISH
Original: FRENCH

WORLD CONFERENCE ON HUMAN RIGHTS
Preparatory Committee
Fourth session
Geneva, 19-30 April 1993
Item 5 of the provisional agenda

STATUS OF PREPARATION OF PUBLICATIONS, STUDIES AND DOCUMENTS FOR THE WORLD CONFERENCE

Note by the secretariat

Addendum

Contribution by the International Movement ATD Fourth World

The attention of the Preparatory Committee is drawn to the attached written contribution entitled "Assessing human rights in the light of the experience of the poorest", submitted by the International Movement ATD Fourth World, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council.

ASSESSING HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE LIGHT OF THE EXPERIENCE OF THE POOREST

A new approach to human rights proposed by Father Joseph Wresinski

This approach is neither intellectual nor bookish in origin; it is part of a story involving the poorest and is derived from the actual experience of the founder of the movement, Father Joseph Wresinski (1917-1988).

It is an attempt to assess the state of human rights as experienced by the poorest:

It is based on a familiarity with the poorest that comes from sharing their lives.

Father Joseph Wresinski, who was born in poverty, himself experienced the humiliation and shame engendered by too great a degree of poverty. Having been led in 1956 to share the life of a population group relegated to a slum settlement in France, he chose to stay there.

He was wont to say that everything stems from a shared life, and never from a theory.

It is based on a lasting commitment.

Father Joseph Wresinski was joined by volunteers in the 1960s; they too were to remain with this poverty-stricken group of people and join with it in a common desire to do away with poverty. The fight for human rights had begun. The basic options of the International Movement ATD Fourth World, drafted in the 1960s, were already very explicit in stating that every individual possesses an innate and inalienable worth which confers dignity.

A lasting commitment emerged at the inception of the movement as a necessity vis-à-vis a population group which has been rejected for so long that it deeply distrusts all those who try to approach it.

Lasting presence engenders confidence, which is so essential for restoring dignity and identity to a population group completely excluded from consideration, sometimes even in its own eyes.

It is based on a commitment which gives priority to the poorest.

The presence of Father Joseph Wresinski, of voluntary workers, of all those who in the course of the years allied themselves with this population group, have finally permitted it to be understood and recognized, and have opened the door to a future which had seemed to be closed. Father Joseph Wresinski had always intended that this opening should liberate the most destitute individual, the most abandoned of all those touched by poverty. It was central to the requirement laid down by the founder of the International Movement ATD Fourth World - priority to the poorest, and to the poorest individual.

In the Wresinski Report of the French Economic and Social Council on extreme poverty and economic and social insecurity, Father Wresinski defined extreme poverty as follows: "Insecurity is the absence of one or more of the securities which enable individuals and families to accept their elementary responsibilities and enjoy their fundamental rights. The resulting insecurity may be relatively extensive and vary in the seriousness and permanence of its consequences. It most often leads to great poverty when it affects several spheres of existence, when it tends to extend over a long period and becomes persistent, when it seriously compromises opportunities for the individual to regain his rights and reassume his responsibilities by himself in a foreseeable future."

This definition refers back to the question posed by the poorest to the international community: what rights and what responsibilities are attributed to the least privileged in the fight to ensure respect for human rights? What place do they have in their country's development and consideration?

* * *

In adopting the agenda of the World Conference on Human Rights, the General Assembly underscored the desire of the United Nations to support progress towards the real and universal enjoyment of all human rights and to overcome persistent obstacles.

Ensuring the convergence of all actions on behalf of human rights by placing at their centre the peoples whom their extreme poverty makes most vulnerable would ensure an overall joint responsibility and give human rights their full stature.

I. SUPPORTING THE PROGRESS ACHIEVED

(1) In the extension and indivisibility of human rights: the poorest reveal the indivisibility of human rights.

Thirty-five years of life shared with individuals, families and groups in a situation of extreme poverty permit the International Movement ATD Fourth World to assert that poverty is a violation of human rights, not only of economic, social and cultural rights but also of civil and political rights.

> "Declarations on human rights assert that all rights are indivisible and interdependent. None of these rights takes priority over the others, but the life of the poorest confirms that this is not a philosophical opinion but the truth of experience.
>
> Poverty marks the ebbing of economic, social and cultural rights. It tortures the body through famine and illness, while through lack of means it forces men, women and children to submit to total dependence and exploitation. But poverty also renders all civil and political freedom null and void. Deprived of his citizenship, the inhabitant of temporary accommodation or a shelter centre can have no voice in the life of the local community. Men and women in a condition of long-term unemployment no longer have any contribution to make to trade union life. Families whose children have been placed in care because of lack of housing and

resources cannot participate in a family organization. Similarly, the right to work and income is valueless if it is not accompanied by civil and political freedom, enabling each individual to take part in the construction of the society in which he works and provides for his family. When he has no freedoms, a man who works is a man who is exploited.

The rights of the rich and the rights of the poor are also indivisible and interdependent. Freedom, the right to work, the right to education and culture cannot progress if we provide them for intellectuals and their children, when the poorest in the same country lack them. This would then be providing privileges for the many, perhaps, but to the detriment of a minority stratum of the population ever more tightly bound to the foot of the social ladder while their fellow citizens have more freedom to exercise all their rights and all their responsibilities.

Indeed, human rights are indivisible because mankind as a whole is indivisible; hence the fundamental indivisibility of the combats we engage in. They necessarily involve solidarity. If they divide us, it may be suspected that they are not really for the rights of all." 1/

(2) In the participation of the poorest in the progress achieved: "The poorest as defenders of human rights."

Ever since the United Nations declared poverty to be a violation of human rights, the international community has had a particular obligation to protect the inalienable rights of peoples which have been submerged by it. In its efforts to reach peoples who do not even have minimum conditions for survival, the International Movement ATD Fourth World proposes that the international community should progress in its commitment to the future of these peoples by gaining access to their experience of life. It is not only democratic but wise to take account of the knowledge of the poor, to realize that the poorest experience situations and come to view them in a way which others cannot imagine for them or in their place.

The poorest must therefore be considered as indispensable partners in the advancement of what are indeed inalienable and therefore unconditional human rights.

"Who is better placed to tell us what justice, peace, fraternity and partnership should be than those who have been dispossessed of them? Who better can tell us what peace is, where it should begin, how far it should go, than the individual who from his birth and for the rest of his life is condemned to undergo enforced exclusion from everything to which he aspires and to which he has a right?" 2/

Progress has been made in recognizing that the poorest must participate:

In the United Nations, the resolution on "Human rights and extreme poverty" (A/47/134) adopted by the General Assembly stresses the desire of States Members of the United Nations to increase their knowledge of the subject with the poorest themselves as their partners. A second

resolution (A/47/196) recognizes that peoples in extreme poverty have been celebrating a "World Day for Overcoming Extreme Poverty" every 17 October since 17 October 1987. In its resolution, the General Assembly institutes the "International Day for the Eradication of Poverty".

Peoples in extreme poverty have themselves had access to the right of expression:

On the initiative of Father Joseph Wresinski, venues for expression, known as Fourth World Popular Universities, have since the early 1970s brought together adults in situations of extreme poverty and people from all backgrounds. As venues for teaching, for learning to reflect together and for speaking out, they provide a unique opportunity for the poorest to express freely their daily experience, particularly as to what human rights mean to them.

The thinking of the poorest concerning human rights has thus progressed over the years, particularly within the Fourth World Popular Universities. Reports have been prepared with the poorest, particularly in France for the French Economic and Social Council in 1987 and for the Commission nationale consultative des droits de l'homme (National advisory commission on human rights) in 1990-1991.

As a European delegate of the Popular Universities meeting in Brussels in June 1991 put it, laws should be adapted to protect the poor from arbitrariness. The poor do not have rights as a matter of course but are obliged to put up a lengthy fight to have them.

II. OVERCOMING PERSISTENT OBSTACLES

(1) Knowledge of extreme poverty is still incomplete

Even now, little enough is known about major poverty either in the advanced economy countries or in the developing continents. When statistics are approximate and qualitative knowledge slight, what becomes of the comprehension of the indivisibility of human rights, although we know how much force and clarity extreme poverty brings to illuminating this very indivisibility?

The international community needs to fashion its own knowledge of poverty and the indivisibility of human rights, as the Commission on Human Rights began to do by requesting a report prepared in conjunction with the poorest population groups (cf. the resolution on "Human rights and extreme poverty" 1989/10, 1990/15, 1991/14, 1992/11, and 1993/L.27). To fail to do so would allow poverty to gain a firmer hold on those already under its sway.

(2) The lack of a true partnership with the poorest

The joint effort towards understanding between the United Nations human rights bodies and populations in a situation of extreme poverty and those committed to working alongside them in the long term is a first step towards

achieving the human rights of the poorest. It must also make up for the lack of a true partnership with them materializing in a significant representation by privileged witnesses.

Does not the situation of the associative life of the poorest, established 35 years ago by Father Joseph Wresinski, justify today the recognition of the poorest in their inalienable dignity which underpins their right to think and to speak both for their own community and for the national and international community?

(3) Persistence of human rights violations

The international community has now become aware that extreme poverty seriously affects the dignity and integrity of those who endure it. For human beings bereft of everything, the defence of civil and political rights is one and the same issue as the defence of their economic, social and cultural rights.

The International Movement ATD Fourth World draws the attention of the World Conference on Human Rights to the following points:

The machinery for the protection and monitoring of human rights does not yet provide adequate protection for persons in a situation of extreme poverty;

Human rights, whether civil and political or economic, social and cultural very often cannot be exercised by persons, families or groups downtrodden by poverty and in a state of destitution.

Human rights require constant attention from everyone and reference back to their initial aim: the individual and the dignity inherent in his status as a human being. Human rights are merely instruments which constantly re-direct law and policies towards this end, thereby calling our attention to the global nature of all policies to combat poverty, through their implementation in indivisibility and the fulfilment of human responsibilities. Father Joseph Wresinski said that peoples living in extreme poverty are giving expression to their conviction that living as men, as brothers and as citizens means being able to carry out these responsibilities. For them, fundamental rights acquire their true sense and achieve full implementation only if they allow them to be responsible, i.e., recognized as workers, as parents able to bring up their children, as useful members of the community, as men and women participating in their country's future. They are thus a lesson to us not only of the indivisibility of rights and responsibilities but also of the shared responsibility implicit in the indivisibility of men and peoples. 2/

III. CONVERGING TOWARDS GLOBAL SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

The Wresinski report on extreme poverty and economic and social insecurity voted by the French Economic and Social Council in 1987, has resulted from a shared responsibility of this nature, and an authentic partnership. It represents what could be described as a guide to knowledge of and a policy against poverty and on behalf of human rights, relevant in every continent although the report was prepared for France. This innovation in fact represents the application to France of a far wider acquaintance

with extreme poverty in the world, which is the heritage left by Fr. Joseph Wresinski. The partnership proceeding used for this report, since known as the "Wresinski Proceeding", is now being proposed to the international community in its evaluation of human rights.

(1) Ensuring the convergence of all actions on behalf of human rights; the poorest as factors of unity in achieving human rights for all

"All actions on behalf of human rights tend towards unity among individuals. They are not intended to divide, even if from time to time they give rise to open debate.

Every action on behalf of freedom, even when concentrated on individuals who are oppressed because of their opinions, also contributes to the freedom of those who have no opportunity to take even the smallest spontaneous initiative because their poverty is too long-standing and too deep-rooted.

Every act to combat torture, even when concentrated on persons subjected to maltreatment in prisons for political reasons, also contributes to banishing the torture of hunger from which men, women and children die in terrible agony.

Every action to combat racism, even when concentrated on particular peoples persecuted for their ethnic origins represents a stand against all forms of persecution. It also helps to do away with the persecution of fellow citizens who, without their economic, social and cultural rights, no longer have the means to present themselves clad in their human dignity, nor to act as serviceable neighbours or responsible fellow citizens.

Every action to combat the oppression of children through labour or prostitution combats all the injustices and abusive exploitation of poverty, inflicted or tolerated by those who have property, knowledge or power which they refuse to share.

Although these actions are at times somewhat dispersed - combating the torture of political prisoners here, denouncing child labour there, releasing an intellectual under house arrest elsewhere, they nevertheless constitute a single effort by men and women who love justice. Every action would gain in impetus and impact if all human rights defenders met periodically to state the fact that they pursue the same goal.

This goal will be all the more convincing if we go further than the many victims of oppression who are capable of voicing their grievances and finding defenders and elect to place at the centre of our common concerns the peoples of all continents who are eaten away by chronic poverty and incapable of speaking out. In their daily struggle to resist annihilation, the men, women, young people and children of the these peoples defend the fundamental rights of all men and demonstrate the basic aspiration of every individual to safeguard his dignity". 1/

(2) Towards a global sharing of responsibility along the path traced by Fr. Joseph Wresinski

A way was opened at the United Nations when Fr. Joseph Wresinski asked the Commission on Human Rights to consider the matter of extreme poverty. Significant stages have been traversed in disseminating the Wresinski Report in the world; the International Movement ATD Fourth World has distributed it to the authorities of industrialized and developing countries and to the leading officials of intergovernmental organizations.

Within these international organizations further progress is still possible. UNICEF, pursuant to its Executive Board decisions 1989/8 and 1991/6 "Reaching the poorest", is endeavouring better to understand the conditions for the participation of the poorest families in its programmes, having observed that in most cases the poorest children are not reached.

Through the International Movement ATD Fourth World and a large number of NGOs, which are frequently small, and work on a long-term basis giving priority to the poorest and meeting within the standing Forum on extreme poverty in the world, a variety of experiences of the implementation of human rights exists in the field throughout the world and points the way to shared responsibility.

These experiences raise the following questions:

How can the history of the poorest be used, and how can the history of the indivisibility of human rights which is manifested in the obscurest places, often through the tenacity of the NGOs, be shared?

How are lessons to be learned from all the promising experiences in the field where the poorest, for example, rediscover strength and courage from being able to participate together - and along with others - in activities for the public good; because together - and along with others - they have been able to speak out and reach the political authorities?

* * *

The International Movement ATD Fourth World and the members of the standing Forum on extreme poverty in the world hope that the World Conference on Human Rights:

Will consider in the light of the experience and thinking of the poorest persons, families and peoples progress in and obstacles to implementing human rights for all as well as the interdependence and indivisibility of economic, social, cultural and civil and political rights;

Will include in its final recommendations the importance of improved knowledge of the experience and thinking of the poor in implementing human rights for all.

The Conference can thus respond to this wish expressed by Fourth World families:

> "Hunger and fear remain but everything is different if we know that our suffering and our hope have been heard and will become a source of hope and peace for all".

Notes

1/ Taken from "L'indivisibilité des droits de l'homme: un appel à l'unité de tous les combats", prepared on the occasion of the first commemoration of the victims of poverty on 17 October 1987, International Movement ATD Fourth World, May 1987.

2/ Taken from "Les plus pauvres révélateurs de l'indivisibilité des droits de l'homme", Father Joseph Wresinski, in "Les droits de l'homme en question", Commission nationale consultative des droits de l'homme, Paris, 1989.